

Candice Millard. 2011. *Destiny of the Republic: A Tale of Madness, Medicine and the Murder of a President*. New York: Doubleday.

What most people recall about President James Garfield is that he was assassinated in the early months of his administration by a “disappointed office seeker.” In her recent book, *Destiny of the Republic: A Tale of Madness, Medicine and the Murder of a President*, Candice Millard illuminates the little-known story of the events and people surrounding the death of America’s 20<sup>th</sup> president. While there is much valuable historical detail in her book, regrettably what is most likely to remain with the reader is the hapless, incompetent medical care given to the wounded president. Among other memorable details are: Thomas Edison’s fruitless scramble to engineer a rudimentary imaging machine that he hoped would locate the unrecovered bullet in Garfield’s body; the delusional and maniacal meanderings of the assassin, Charles Guiteau; and the two-month vigil of the stunned American public, which just sixteen years earlier endured the first political assassination of a U.S. President, Abraham Lincoln, in the midst of the trauma of the Civil War. These are some of the more engrossing parts of history that emerge from *Destiny of the Republic*. However, the most indelibly etched piece relates to the humility, wisdom and strength of will Millard ascribes to James Garfield.

Millard organizes the book around quotations intended to illuminate Garfield’s character, a man she clearly admires. At the beginning of each chapter, she includes a quote from Garfield which relates to the chapter’s theme—selections which it must be assumed are reflections

of the authentic Garfield. The quotations, along with accounts of Garfield's hard-scrabble youth, his native intelligence, and his service to his country in the war and in Congress, are combined with the author's respect for his character, intellect, and humility. In all, they paint the president in Lincolnesque hues, and the quotes Millard offers reinforce this portrait. For instance, this passage reflects his egalitarian view of human potential, as well as a testimony to his own ascent, "I never meet a ragged boy in the street without feeling that I may owe him a salute, for I know not what possibilities may be buttoned up under his coat." Or this, which reveals his orientation to service and his eschewing of the lower aspects of politics: "I love to deal with doctrines and events. The contests of men about men I greatly dislike." And there is his progressive, good-government prescription: "Light itself is a great corrective. A thousand wrongs and abuses that are grown in darkness disappear like owls and bats before the light of day." There appears also the warm and luminously positive human being that emerges from the opinion of so many who knew him well, especially his family, which is wonderfully captured when Garfield writes, "If wrinkles must be written upon our brows, let them not be written upon the heart. The spirit should not grow old."

Millard's book is engrossing for all the examples cited above and many others. The reader learns about the primitive air conditioner rigged up by naval technicians to provide the laboring president with modest respite from the oppressive Washington summer. In addition to the dated medical practices, we are confronted with the obdurate and egotistical character of Dr. Willard Bliss, the principal physician who Millard condemns as being the chief cause of Garfield's death. And, sadly, we find an admirably patient but perhaps too-compliant president, family, and friends, who yielded time and again to the ham-handed ministrations of the dictatorial Bliss. These events and characters make *Destiny* a page-turning read.

Unfortunately for historians and political scientists, there are elements missing from Millard's narrative. The author could easily have sketched some of the momentous trends and confounding excesses of the

Gilded Age, such as the gathering speed of the westward movement, the rapid industrialization and urban growth, the rising tide of immigration, the granting and subsequent deprivation of political rights to recently-freed African Americans, the persistent domination of the political power of the states and the economic interests that controlled most of them, and the cascading waves of corruption in a system dominated largely by a single political party. This kind of context would have aided readers, for example, in understanding why the likes of Roscoe Conkling and James Blaine figure prominently in several chapters. Given Americans' general anti-historical bias, Millard's narrative would have benefited from more background.

Finally, it is hard to understand how *Destiny of the Republic* is an appropriate title. Garfield included the phrase in his 1880 Chicago convention speech because he wished to remind his audience that the people at home, not those in the convention hall, would determine the country's future. In a chapter titled "One Nation" Millard states that the weeks of watching and waiting as Garfield's health slowly deteriorated helped heal Americans' emotional scars from the Civil War. She argues that he was a cathartic figure because he "represented both what they were and hoped to be." She quotes one contemporary's claim that the attack seemed to almost magically unite the nation. If these and similar passages are to serve as a rationale for how Garfield's tragic end somehow transformed the destiny of the republic, then it is unconvincingly argued and not supported by noted Garfield biographers. On the other hand, the book's subtitle (*A Tale of Madness, Medicine and the Murder of a President*) is entirely appropriate, for it clearly represents the story of her book.

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